

Does the Faculty Care? Engaging Faculty Across Campus on Sustainability Issues

Summary by Lisa Fernandez

Panelists

Kim Marsella, *Environmental Studies Program & Department of Geosciences, Skidmore College**

Sandra Wachholz, *Professor, Environmental and Gender Studies, University of Southern Maine*

Jack Byrne, *Coordinator, Sustainability Programs, Middlebury College*

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How can faculty best become engaged in making their professional home, the college campus, sustainable? This workshop identified successful approaches to involving faculty, particular those outside of environmental studies programs.

WRI, CST: ACRONYMS FOR CHANGE AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE

Kim Marsella opened with an overview of Skidmore: a small liberal arts college with 2300 students and 650 acres. Skidmore is located in upstate New York, inside the Adirondack Preserve. Its north woods location is recognized as rich and diverse. Compared to peer institutions, Skidmore's endowment is relatively small. Although it is changing, campus culture is not currently focused on sustainability issues. Thus there is not a formal sustainability office or coordinator. Efforts in the sustainability arena have been ad-hoc in nature and led by students and/or faculty.

Sustainability efforts have been organized through three programs: the environmental studies program, the Campus Environment Committee (CEC), and the student-run Environmental Action Coalition (EAC). As a result, sustainability action has been dominated by a small core group that does not change much. These actors acknowledge the need for change, to build broad-based support for sustainability in the curriculum and on campus and to include more voices.

To invite this engagement, the CEC sponsored scholarly debates on sustainability issues and asked faculty that had not participated in campus environmental fora to participate. A high-profile change was that sustainability language was inserted in one

of the “Engaged Liberal Learning” goals of Skidmore’s 2005-2015 Strategic Plan. Furthermore, the CEC was formalized as an official Skidmore College committee with a mission statement and membership to include set numbers of faculty, staff and students for designated terms. The CEC reports to the President and the Institutional Planning Group.

Finally, broad involvement was invited in two key environmental initiatives on campus. The first is the Water Resources Initiative, or WRI. It brings together faculty and students with community partners to study local water issues. WRI is implemented through courses, summer and team-based research, as well as independent study. The approach is interdisciplinary and examines the natural, social and cultural influences that shape the human relationship with water. While the focus is local, international field trips place the issues in a global context.

The second initiative is the Campus Sustainability Team or CST. This is a team of faculty, facilities personnel and students to design and implement campus greening projects. Over a two-year period, the CST consists of the time of 8 paid student interns, one-third time of a facilities staff member, and 40 percent of a faculty member. The commitment releases the faculty member from teaching two courses. The goals of the CST are to increase the number and visibility of sustainability projects on campus and to heighten awareness of ecological footprint issues and resource use by everyone on campus.

GREENING THE CURRICULUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

Dr. Wachholz introduced her talk with a quote from David Orr: “What will people need to know to live responsibly and well in a finite world?” National studies indicate that the average college graduate has very little understanding of the current environmental challenges facing the planet. Many of the facts of current climate change are undisputed; however, partly because these facts are not more widely known, the urgency of addressing them has not yet been acknowledged by the current generation of students.

One approach Wachholz takes to mainstreaming environmental issues is the “Casco Bay Project.” In the fall of 2005 and 2006, 16 faculty members were asked to

1. reflect on the bearing “sustainability” has on their disciplines;
2. develop a deeper connection to “place” and each other;
3. incorporate environmental sustainability in at least one course.

The key was to foster community and connection and to signal a respect for the faculty member’s time by paying them a stipend for the 2.5-day commitment to the project. The approach is based on the “Ponderosa Project” developed at the University of Arizona, which reached 4,000 students via 100 faculty teaching 40 students per course over a six year period.

Another approach is to integrate sustainability broadly into teaching via content, process, and practice. Including sustainability content has been two-pronged, via (1) interdisciplinary analysis of environmental issues and sustainability concerns; and (2) integration of the environmental aspects of a discipline into the classroom. An example is the sociology of law around the invasive plant Asiatic Bittersweet. This invasive species, like others, displaces native species, negatively affecting local ecosystems and often requiring costly mitigation. Another example is an examination of the environmental aspects of the “War Against Drugs.” This would entail examining the sustainability of car patrols vs. “walking the beat” and herbicide spraying of plants grown for illegal drugs, etc.

Integrating sustainability into the teaching process emphasizes active, experiential and inquiry based learning. A key piece is the concept of place-based learning, which helps students foster a connection to their community and the environment. The Portland State University course “Academic Writing Meets Local Food Systems” is one example that takes a thematic approach to sustainability in a skill-based course. In another example, the key is service learning, which integrates community service with instruction and reflection. In this case, Front Range Community College taught an environmental law class structured around developing an organic garden with senior citizens.

Integrating sustainability into teaching practice involves learning where students are engaged with the practice of sustainable living, both in the classroom and on campus. Here, the emphasis is on using the campus as a classroom. Students are encouraged to explore the campus’ ecology and sustainability and to note where changes are needed. For example, Goucher College students in an international studies course surveyed the campus looking for dripping water and then studied world consumption patterns. At the University of South Carolina students plotted lights left on at night. Finally, the classroom may be the best classroom of all: it is the first place to model sustainability by using natural resources as efficiently as possible (paper, cups, bags, lights).

SUSTAINABILITY IS PART OF MY JOB: HOW TO GET PEOPLE FROM HAPPILY UNINFORMED TO “TELL ME MORE.”

Jack Byrne seconded Wachholz’ view that the actions of faculty and staff are the models that “equip students to shape a future that is sustainable, or not.” Historically, there was a huge buffer between human activity and nature. Now, that buffer has been squeezed to such an extent that every human activity can be considered to impact the natural world. Furthermore, there has been a significant shift in the types of constraints on human behavior. Humanity was largely “material-constrained” until relatively recently, and most human action was essentially an adaptation to scarcity. Now, humanity is what may be termed “meaning-constrained.” In this context, power is based not on physical assets, but on network assets. Also, the capacity to learn is more important than the capacity to adapt, and sustainability, not scarcity, is the overriding paradigm.

Faculty engagement in sustainability at Middlebury College acknowledges this shift. The College's commitment to environmental stewardship is explicit in its mission statement. Reflecting this, Environmental Studies and Environmental Affairs are prominent and important at Middlebury. The interdisciplinary Environmental Studies Program boasts nine core faculty and 46 affiliated faculty from 18 different departments (out of a total of 223 faculty). A core course, ES 401, consists of community service projects that touch on sustainability issues from a variety of angles and disciplines.

For example, one project collaborated with Vermont Interfaith Power and Light, a new state-level chapter of a national network of religious groups addressing climate change. The primary goal of this project was to develop a "state of the state" report on how various religious institutions across the state were addressing environmental issues – were they already very active, interested in becoming active but needed support in getting started, or not active, and not interested in becoming so. The resulting report laid the foundation for Vermont Interfaith Power and Light's work planning.

The broader impact of this project was on network building and resource sharing to foster even greater activity amongst religious groups, not just on climate change, but on other issues as well. This work also fostered several other service-learning project opportunities – two related to building a statewide climate coalition of diverse stakeholders, and another project for a psychology course looking at the impact of Earth Institute courses on communities throughout the state.

Environmental Affairs is the administrative nexus of sustainability at Middlebury. Under its auspices, there are several initiatives. A design committee of faculty, staff, and students was involved from start to finish in the plans for the new LEED silver certified Hillcrest Center, an adaptive reuse of an old building. In an annual environmental retreat, the sustainability agenda is reviewed. The retreat gives faculty and staff an opportunity to bond and together commit to sustainability goals.

Yet another entity at Middlebury is the Environmental Council, consisting of faculty, staff and students appointed by the President. It is a forum to ensure that sustainability goals are integrated into policy and planning. The Council also administers an environmental grants program and collaborates with other college councils, including student government.

Middlebury's carbon reduction initiative (CRI) set out goals and strategies for minimizing the campus' climate impact in 2003. Since then, the university trustees passed a resolution establishing an initial target goal of reducing College greenhouse gas emissions by eight percent below 1990 levels by 2012, adjusted on a student (per capita) basis.

The initiative organized a conference in 2005 to examine what strategies were working. The conference involved faculty and students from Economics and Environmental Studies. CRI oversees the implementation of several ongoing projects aimed at achieving the college's carbon reduction plan. These include assessing available and emerging technologies and economic instruments that could create reductions in campus Carbon Dioxide Equivalent (CDE) emissions or enhance the rate of CDE sequestration, thereby offsetting some fraction of the college's emissions.